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BIOLOGICAL WEAPONS

Effort to Reduce Former Soviet Threat Offers Benefits, Poses New Risks



G A O

Accountability * Integrity * Reliability

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National Security and
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The Honorable Floyd Spence
Chairman
The Honorable Ike Skelton
Ranking Minority Member
Committee on Armed Services
House of Representatives

The Honorable Pat Roberts
Chairman, Subcommittee on Emerging
Threats and Capabilities
Committee on Armed Services
United States Senate

Although it signed the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention,¹ the former Soviet Union covertly developed the world's largest offensive biological weapons program, which relied on a network of military and nonmilitary scientific institutes, according to a January 2000 Department of Defense report to Congress.² Many of these nonmilitary institutes were overseen by Biopreparat—an ostensibly civilian pharmaceutical enterprise that exploited the inherent dual-use nature of biotechnology to mask Soviet development of biological weapons using specially engineered strains of dangerous pathogens, including anthrax, plague, and smallpox. Russia renounced the Soviet program in 1992 and subsequently cut funding for Biopreparat institutes; nonetheless, the United States remains concerned about the extent of Russia's compliance with the Convention. Reasons for concern include Biopreparat's retention of its Cold War leadership and existing ties to former Soviet nonmilitary biological weapons institutes in Russia, although Biopreparat no longer funds them. Although Russia has generally allowed the United States access to its nonmilitary institutes that receive U.S. nonproliferation assistance, Russia has consistently rebuffed

¹The Convention's full title is the "Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production, and Stockpiling of Bacteriological (Biological) and Toxin Weapons and on Their Destruction" (26 U.S. Treaty 583, Apr. 10, 1972).

²Section 1308: Report on Biological Weapons Programs in Russia (Arlington, VA: Department of Defense, Jan. 2000). This report is required under the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 1999 (P.L. 105-261).

U.S. efforts to inspect its military institutes currently managed by the Ministry of Defense.

Notwithstanding these concerns, in 1994 the United States began funding collaborative research projects with former Soviet biological weapons scientists³ because it feared that these scientists might be driven by financial pressures to sell their skills to countries of proliferation concern or to terrorist groups.⁴ The executive branch initially funded this effort at modest levels and used it to redirect scientists to peaceful activities; however, it is now expanding the program's size and scope. Because of this shift, you asked us to review U.S. efforts to address the threat of biological weapons proliferation from the former Soviet Union. Accordingly, we examined

- the potential threats that the former Soviet biological weapons institutes could pose to the United States,
- current and future U.S. efforts to address these threats, and
- risks associated with the expanded U.S. effort and executive branch plans to mitigate them.

Key sources of information for this report include policy and program officials from the Departments of State, Defense, and Energy, as well as other U.S. government agencies and nongovernmental organizations. We also obtained information about the former Soviet biological weapons program from the former Deputy Chief of Biopreparat (1988-92), who now lives in Virginia. In December 1999, we visited six former Soviet nonmilitary biological weapons institutes in Russia that receive U.S. assistance. We also visited and met with officials from the International Science and Technology Center in Moscow. We developed this report based on unclassified sources and information; however, we also obtained classified information from the Departments of State and Defense.

³Early engagement efforts were funded through the International Science and Technology Center using Department of Defense Cooperative Threat Reduction funds. Funding responsibility for the Science Center was transferred to the Department of State in 1996.

⁴We defined terrorists as non-state actors that are not provided with a state-developed weapon. Terrorists could be of foreign or domestic origin and would be operating illegally and outside a state-run laboratory infrastructure or weapons program.